

# Primary Source Activity

**networks**

## Social Darwinism

### Background

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution holds that a process Darwin called "natural selection" determined which species would survive and which would not. The species that survived did so because of their advantageous genetic makeup. Conversely, species that died out did so because their genetic makeup was not equal to the task of survival.

Natural selection was at the heart of social Darwinism. Social Darwinists believed that people who prosper in life do so because they have the intelligence, education, drive, and good sense to get ahead. They also believed that people who do not prosper lack these essential qualities. Social Darwinists did not believe in aiding the disadvantaged. Rather, they believed the poor should be allowed to fail to make the human race progressively stronger.

**Directions:** The following two primary sources explore the elements of social Darwinism. Read them carefully and then answer the questions that follow.

The moment that government provided work for one, it would have to provide work for all, and there would be no end whatever possible. Society does not owe any man a living. In all the cases that I have ever known of young men who claimed that society owed them a living, it has turned out that society paid them—in the State prison . . . The fact that a man is here is no demand upon other people that they shall keep him alive and sustain him. He has got to fight the battle with nature as every other man has; and if he fights it with the same energy and enterprise and skill and industry as any other man, I cannot imagine his failing—that is, misfortune apart.

—William Graham Sumner, testimony before  
the U.S. House of Representatives, 1879

1. What is Sumner's thesis in this excerpt?
2. Do you think a social Darwinist would lend support to a local food bank or school lunch subsidies? Why?
3. Do you think social Darwinist ideas are around today? Explain.

# Primary Source Activity *Cont.*

networks

## Social Darwinism

### Making Comparisons

William Sumner and Peter Kropotkin have very different ideas about society's obligations to the individual. As you read the following excerpt, identify ways that the two men disagree.

Although the destruction of mutual-aid institutions has been going on in practice and theory, for full three or four hundred years, hundreds of millions of men continue to live under such institutions; they piously maintain them and endeavor [sic] to reconstitute them where they have ceased to exist. In our mutual relations every one of us has his moments of revolt against the fashionable individualistic creed of the day, and actions in which men are guided by their mutual aid inclinations constitute so great a part of our daily intercourse that if a stop to such actions could be put all further ethical progress would be stopped at once. Human society itself could not be maintained for even so much as the lifetime of one single generation.

from *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Revolution*, Peter Kropotkin, 1902

### Critical Thinking

1. What are "mutual-aid institutions"? Provide some examples of mutual aid.
2. What is Kropotkin implying when he says that closing down mutual-aid institutions would put a stop to ethical progress?
3. What is the principal difference between Sumner and Kropotkin?